Focus Group Meeting
High Speed Rail Feasibility and Planning Study
South Burlington, Vermont

May 2, 2002

A focus group meeting for the Boston to Montreal High Speed Rail feasibility and planning study was held on May 2, 2002 at the offices of the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization (CCMPO) in South Burlington, Vermont. Susan Smichenko of Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc., public outreach consultants for the study, facilitated the meeting. Scott Bascom, Multimodal Planning Coordinator for the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) was at the meeting representing the Steering Committee for the study.

Ms. Smichenko opened the meeting by providing a brief overview of the purpose of the meeting which was to solicit pubic feedback on the study from specific individuals with interests related to recreation and tourism, transportation, and economic development. Scott Bascom then provided an overview of the study and described the study's partnership between Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont as well as their coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). He explained that the concept of high speed rail (HSR) for this corridor is not necessarily defined by speed, but rather how it could compete with other modes of transportation, particularly automobiles.

Introductions of the participants were made including: Peter Keating of the CCMPO, Norman James of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, Ted Child of Child Travel Services, David Dillon of the Vermont Ski Areas Association, Jeff Munger of Senator Jim Jeffords' office, Greg Maguire of the State of Vermont Tourism and Marketing Department, and Luc Deneault of the Quebec Ministry of Transport.

QUESTIONS/CONCERNS

The first part of the meeting focused on questions and concerns regarding the study from the participants. Questions and associated comments included the following:

- Is the existing situation with Amtrak indicative of the future for the high speed rail service? Could this service enhance the operations of Amtrak?
- Will the study's market analysis address other city pairs than just Boston and Montreal? Lebanon, New Hampshire and Boston, and Burlington and Boston were identified as important city pairs that should be considered in the study. It was mentioned that travel between Burlington and White River Junction and Boston has been increasing lately. It was also noted that there has been less air travel between Boston and Montreal in the last fifteen years.
- How long is the trip expected to take between Boston and Montreal? One participant indicated that if the estimated travel time is six hours, then it will not be competitive with a similar trip by automobile, except in time periods that experience extreme traffic congestion or severe weather.

- Will the study look globally? International tourism is dependent on providing alternative transportation modes to travelers once they've reached the United States. European travelers have indicated that New England has a transportation problem, and that it is difficult to travel between Boston and Vermont.
- Would a HSR service be considered commuter rail? Mr. Bascom responded that a HSR service would not operate as commuter rail.
- Is the role of freight and its profitability considered in the study? Mr. Bascom indicated that the freight companies are not supportive of sharing the tracks, however it is necessary due to the single-track line available along the corridor and the prohibitive costs of building a second line. The fact that much of Europe has two tracks – one for freight and one for passenger rail – was discussed. It was noted that the U.S. does not provide separate tracks for passenger and rail; the tracks are used by both services, however when a rail line is improved for passenger rail it is also improved for freight. In addition, rail line improvements would help time competitive freight such as containers and doublestack.
- Will the study address intermediate stops? Mr. Bascom explained the Train Performance Calculator (TPC) being used in the study and how primary and secondary stops are entered into the model to determine the effects of additional stops on total travel time.
- How visionary is the route and have alternate routes (i.e. White River Junction to Guilford to Boston) been considered? Will the study consider a new alignment to eliminate the curves? Mr. Bascom said that the high speed rail corridor designation by the FRA is only for this route and that some straightening of the curves will be looked at in the TPC model.
- Will the changing demographics of the population be incorporated in the study? The comment was made relative to the fact that the increase in the elderly population should be addressed in the study since elderly people prefer the train versus air travel. Another participant mentioned that this fact could be generational, and not indicative of future trends.

A number of concerns/issues regarding the implementation of a HSR service were identified by the participants including:

- The United States does not have a successful history of support and political will on projects such as high speed rail service. However, it is recognized that any high speed rail service will need subsidy.
- It is important for the region to have good mass transit to be competitive for the world market.
- Border crossing is a high cost, time intensive process which needs to be streamlined.
- Political influence will affect the number and location of stations.
- The cost of the project will be prohibitive. However, consideration should be given to the high costs associated with upgrading existing airport facilities.
- Logan Airport's limited capacity is a big problem. The tendency for the regional flights Vermont to be the first cancelled out of this airport was identified.

- Sustainability is a key issue which needs to be addressed in the study. Also, the future service should not impact the viability of other modes of transportation, for example, regional air travel.
- The service will be most successful if it provides connectivity to other forms of transportation – air, bus, ferry, car rentals. The more stops in Vermont, the more diluted the market for car rentals. Car rental would work best with two stops in Vermont with service located at the stations.
- Bundling travel and tourism packages would make a potential service more marketable.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Potential impacts of a future service were discussed. In terms of environmental issues, one participant noted that there would be concerns in community centers, particularly noise and safety at grade crossings. Land use around station areas was addressed. The group indicated that a HSR service would provide a good opportunity to upgrade existing facilities at station locations, but that additional development was not likely to be a factor.

The economic impact for tourism resulting from a HSR service in New England was regarded positively by the group. However, participants again emphasized the need for a potential service to provide connectivity to other modes of transportation, particularly airports. They indicated that in order for it to be successful, and not negatively affect existing transportation services, a HSR service must be complimentary to those other services.

OVERALL TRANSPORTATION PICTURE

The group was asked their perspective on how a high speed rail would fit into the overall transportation picture for the region. The discussion focused on air travel and the importance of providing connections between airports and a HSR service. Dorval Airport in Montreal was discussed as a destination for people traveling internationally. One participant felt that using Dorval is easier than flying from Burlington to other major airports, and therefore a HSR service could potentially facilitate these trips. It was noted by another in the group, however, that the current cost of regional flights from Burlington is low enough that most travelers would not choose Montreal as their origin point. It was also noted that there is currently no rail connection to Dorval Airport.

Another point was the reduced market for corporate travel to Montreal, and the fact that the market for air travel between Burlington and Boston has decreased over the years. Travel still occurs between the two cities, however it is more convenient to drive.

The group addressed that the fact that a HSR service would provide redundancy in the overall transportation system which is important and something that is needed in the region. Also mentioned was the role that a HSR service should contribute to intermodalism in the region by providing connections to air, ferry, and bus services.

Peter Keating from the CCMPO noted that it will be important for both Chittenden County and the State of Vermont to include the potential for HSR service in the corridor in their long range transportation plans.

FUNDING

Participants were asked how they viewed a HSR service in terms of a priority for transportation funding. The group agreed that it should be considered in long range transportation planning efforts when investigating all transportation options for a region.

The group generally agreed that this service will not happen without significant subsidies from the federal government, up to eighty or ninety percent of the cost.

One participant noted the United States' dependency on oil and indicated that if supplies are limited, then the perspective on rail and subsidies might change. Also discussed was the fact that other countries use fuel taxes to provide financial resources for rail projects.

OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY A HSR SERVICE

The group was asked to identify other opportunities which may result with the implementation of a HSR service. Tour groups and car rental companies were noted as two entities which could benefit from a HSR service.

The Essex to Burlington commuter rail project was discussed in terms of its potential connection to a HSR service.

VISION OF A HSR SERVICE

The group was asked to describe how they envision a HSR service. The ideal amenities identified included:

- Clean and comfortable
- Customer oriented staff
- On-time service
- Ability to use computers and cell phones, and access to power supply
- Good food
- At seat video
- Clean restrooms
- Larger seats

One participant said that a HSR service should follow the JetBlue example in terms of service and amenities. Also noted was JetBlue's success in creating demand with low cost, comfortable, customer oriented travel. It was agreed that the service must pay attention to customers, not stockholders, for it to be successful.

Finally, the group agreed that in order for a service to become a reality, it must receive funding from the federal government.

CONCLUSION

Participants were thanked for their input and the meeting was closed by Ms. Smichenko with the invitation to attend the public meetings held in August or September for the presentation of the study's findings. The group was asked to keep informed on the study and provide feedback to the team via the study's website, www.bostonmontrealhsr.org.